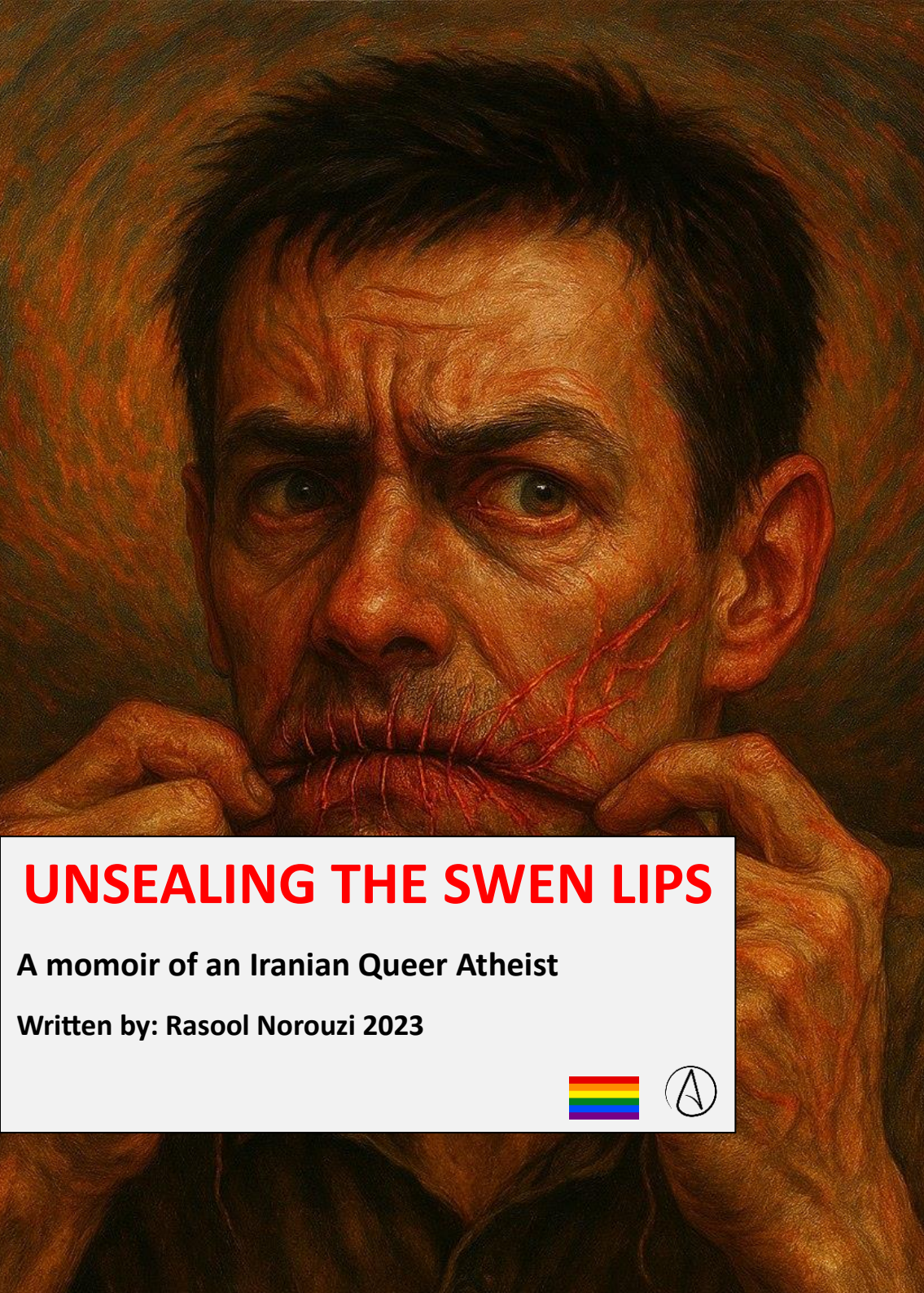




UNSEALING THE SWEN LIPS

A momoir of an Iranian Queer Atheist

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Introduction

Since I have a deep interest in **Nietzsche's** writings, I will begin the introduction of this book with one of his sayings:

Truth is not something that the majority decides. Truth must be discovered at the cost of loneliness, suffering, and even the hostility of others.

I, Rasool Norouzi, an Iranian queer atheist, am writing this book with the aim of sharing my pain, struggles, and lived experiences with people around the world especially my fellow beings in Iran and in countries ruled by oppressive regimes. This book tells the story of breaking the silence of those whose lips have been sewn shut by repression and coercion. Their pain and loneliness make life unbearably harsh and exhausting.

In this book, I have sought to reveal the hidden dimensions of the lives of queer people and atheists, as well as to shed light on the rigid and inhumane laws of the Islamic Republic of Iran and its reactionary society, which inflict suffering and persecution on sexual and religious minorities.

In Iran a land that was once the cradle of love, culture, and art my identity and beliefs are treated as crimes. Silence becomes the safest choice, as the law dictates that my love may be punishable by death, and my disbelief in God may drag me into the darkest imaginable places.

In the street, strange looks seem to be searching for an excuse to judge me, and at home, words and allusions are like a heavy burden on my shoulders. Even in my solitude, it feels like someone is chasing me, and I'm always tormented by the fear of being exposed. But silence suffocates me, and I'm not the kind of person who can always surrender to silence, because I feel like I'm losing a piece of my being.

This book is my story; the story of a queer atheist who lived in the shadows of Iran and whose lips were sealed because they weren't like everyone else. But they decided one day to cast their heart to the sea and open their lips and cry out their pain. Of course, this book is not just my narrative; it's also the narrative of many others in this country who are living difficult lives on the fringes and are not allowed to be seen or heard.

Where law and culture have joined hands to silence my voice, speaking the truth is considered a form of rebellion and revolution. But I believe the truth will eventually find its way. This book is my invitation to you to join me, and if-

you are curious to know what life is like for a queer atheist in Iran, it can be a window for you into a world you haven't seen.

Writing this book is not without danger for me, and I know that if government institutions become aware of its publication, they will come after me, and this book might even lead to my execution. Therefore, I will not publish this book until I am forced to flee Iran or until it is too late for secrecy. I hope that the maximum dissemination of this book will bring help and support to my fellow human beings in the Middle East and Iran.

Part One: Childhood and Roots

Home and Family

My childhood was immersed in an atmosphere where religion and tradition were as ever-present as the air we breathed. In our home, the walls were adorned with religious pictures and writings—from the framed "Bismillah" above the door to the Qurans that were always within reach. My mother always said, "Life without God is like a body without a soul." And my father believed that

the only true way to live was through complete obedience to Islamic law.

To my parents, a good child was one who was familiar with sacred religious teachings from an early age and followed Islamic rulings meticulously. Prayer and fasting were part of our daily routine. Even when I was too young to fast, my mother would encourage me to observe "sparrow fasting" (a lighter form of fasting for children). These practices taught me that religion was not just a belief but a measure of a person's worth. I learned that a good person was someone who prayed, fasted, and obeyed. In this environment, questioning didn't have much place. Whenever I asked something that pushed beyond the boundaries, I'd hear responses like, "Only God knows these things," or "Don't be too curious; faith is more important than questions."

In our religion, which was Shia Islam, questioning was equated with doubting, and according to the holy texts, doubting was the work of Satan—a sign of weakness and his influence over a person.

Despite this atmosphere, I had a childhood full of imagination. I loved books, stories, and tales. Sometimes,

I would create an imaginary world where I could ask anything I wanted without anyone scolding me. Perhaps it was during those years that the seeds of my first questions were planted in my mind, even if no one had noticed them yet.

School and the First Questions

For many children, school is a place to learn math and science, but for me, it was mostly a place where I became aware of my differences. Teachers spoke firmly and decisively about religion and faith. In the mornings, all the students would line up and recite morning prayers or religious songs. I, like everyone else, raised my voice, but inside, something troubled me.

I can still hear the voice of our religion teacher saying, *“Faith means complete obedience, it means unquestioning submission.”* At the time, I didn’t understand why, but those words made me think. Doesn’t a human have reason? Isn’t reason meant for asking questions? If God created us with intellect, why is questioning considered disrespectful?

It was during those years that the first sparks of my identity also began to appear. When I looked at my classmates, something different stirred within me. Most of the boys talked about girls, but I felt something that was difficult-

even for me to explain. In silence, I wondered why I was not like them.

I always felt that something was wrong, and that feeling grew stronger every day. I couldn't understand why there was no explanation for my difference, or why a kind God would cause me to feel this way.

The Conflict Between Inside and Outside

From an early age, I learned to wear two faces: one I showed to others, and one I kept only in private. On the outside, I was the obedient, faithful child everyone expected to see; but inside, my mind was full of questions. Why are some things forbidden? Why must love be limited? Why does God divide people strictly into "believers" and "non-believers"?

This dual personality troubled me, yet sometimes I felt a strange satisfaction in being different from others. The contrast grew stronger every day. The more obedience and imitation were emphasized at home and at school, the more my mind leaned toward questioning. Sometimes, in the middle of the night, when everyone was asleep, I would stare at the ceiling and ask myself: what if all of this is just a constructed narrative? What if reality is something else entirely?

The First Fears

My childhood was accompanied by fears that might seem strange to others: the fear of a hell where I would be burned, the fear of what would happen if I ever stopped believing, and, most of all, the fear of what would happen if my true feelings toward others were discovered.

Every time I heard about God's punishments in the mosque, my heart would tighten. I thought that if God would not forgive someone like me, then I was doomed from childhood. This feeling made many years of my life pass under a cloud of anxiety and guilt.

Several times, I even considered ending my life so that, before my sins accumulated, I could leave the world and avoid experiencing more torment in hell. But later, I learned from the religion teacher that suicide is one of the gravest sins, and that those who commit it would burn in fire forever. I abandoned the idea of suicide.

Hidden Sparks

Despite everything, there was something in my childhood that glowed like a small spark in the darkness. Those daydreams, those little questions, those moments when I quietly told myself: maybe life is more than this. Maybe-

the truth lies somewhere beyond the boundaries that have been drawn for me.

When I watched foreign films and documentaries on television, I would ask myself: do all these people who are not Muslim go to hell? Are all the efforts they've made for nothing? Has God guided only us?

These sparks may have seemed small and faint, but they were the seeds that later grew into a large tree, shaping the path of my life. On the surface, my childhood resembled that of millions of other Iranian children; yet inside, it was full of conflict, questions, and silence—a silence that lasted for years, until it finally found its voice.

Part Two: Discovering Identity

The Beginning of Difference

For many, adolescence is a time of excitement and thrill, but for me, it felt more like a period of confusion and fear. While my friends gradually fell in love and joked about the girls at the neighboring school, I sank into a heavy silence. It wasn't that I had no feelings—on the contrary, my heart raced too—but not for the people everyone expected. A glance or smile from a boy could make me lose myself, yet I couldn't tell anyone about this secret.

Every time my friends spoke about their teenage crushes, I secretly wished I could talk as freely as they did. But a hidden fear stifled everything inside me. Even thinking about what might happen if someone found out sent shivers down my spine.

Denial and the Mask

In the early years of adolescence, I tried repeatedly to deny these feelings. I would tell myself, *"This is just a fantasy. It will pass."* Sometimes, I even deliberately tried to show interest in a girl to convince myself, *"I'm just like everyone else."* But every time, the mask fell apart quickly. The heart cannot be fooled.

I had learned to play a role. In social settings, I said the things that were expected of me. When boys talked about their female classmates, I smiled or nodded along. But inside, something entirely different was happening. This duality was exhausting, yet I had no choice.

The First Sparks of Doubt

Alongside these experiences, my faith began to waver. Since childhood, I had seen God as kind and forgiving, a being who loves His servants. But at school and in the

mosque, I heard something else: a strict God who punishes even the smallest “sins” with torment.

I remember many days when our religion teacher would say with absolute certainty, *“Homosexuality is one of the greatest sins. God has cursed such people.”* Every time I heard those words, my blood ran cold. What had I done, other than live as I truly was? Had I chosen to be this way? If God was my creator, why had He made me in a way that He Himself considered “deserving of punishment”?

When I was fifteen, I met a boy named Esmaeil and suggested having a sexual relationship with him. We went to a secluded and supposedly safe place on the outskirts of the village, but unfortunately, Esmaeil had set a trap for me with a group of his friends. I was assaulted by the group, and the incident deeply broke my heart. For a long time afterward, I avoided getting close to any boys and was even afraid of my own brothers.

After this incident, I tried to connect with girls, but there were two major obstacles. First, Iranian girls at this age usually keep their distance from boys. Second, my temperament and personality were somewhat feminine, which made it difficult for the girls to accept me.

These contradictions burned inside me like a hidden fire. Gradually, I realized that something was wrong. Faith no longer brought me the peace it once did; instead, it felt more like a chain weighing heavily around my neck.

Nights Without Answers

At night, when everyone else was asleep, I wrestled silently with myself. I would often stare at the ceiling, praying in my heart: "God, if you really exist, why did you create me this way? Why should what I feel in my heart be considered a sin? Why should love—the most beautiful feeling in the world—bring a curse?"

But no answer ever came. The only thing that remained was silence; a silence that gradually pushed me toward doubt. Perhaps there was no answer because my questions were leading me toward a different truth—a truth beyond what I had been told.

Living with Two Burdens

Enduring either of these burdens alone—being queer or being faithless—was difficult. But carrying both at the same time turned my life into an internal battlefield. On

one side, a society that condemned the slightest sign of difference; on the other, a religious family that equated doubt with betrayal.

As a result, I learned to live two lives: one outward life, full of roles and masks, and another inner life, full of secrets, fear, and questions. Sometimes, I felt I no longer even knew who I truly was. I had played so many roles that the boundary between truth and appearance had blurred in my mind.

Hidden Loneliness

No one knew what I was going through. Even my closest friends were unaware of these secrets. Fear of judgment, rejection, and even real dangers kept me silent. But this very silence plunged me deeper and deeper into loneliness.

This loneliness was the heaviest part of my adolescence. While others were caught up in the simple thrills of love and friendship, I was often alone with my thoughts. The only one who truly knew me was that "inner me," who always had to remain hidden behind a wall.

Part Three: Iran and Social Realities

Life as a Queer Person in Iran

Living in Iran for someone like me, who is both queer and atheist, is like walking through a minefield. Every step I take, I have to be careful about who is around me and who might discover my secret. Our society is still deeply traditional and religious, and any difference—whether in religious belief or sexual orientation—is considered taboo.

When I was a teenager, I realized that even the smallest signs could be dangerous: a smile that lingered too long at someone of the same sex, a prolonged glance, or even a simple joke about feelings was enough for people to start whispering behind my back. This fear made me constantly monitor my words and actions. Sometimes at night, when everyone was asleep, I would replay scenarios in my mind, wondering what would happen if someone noticed, and these thoughts would steal my sleep.

Social Pressure and Laws

Official laws add to this pressure. In Iran, any sexual orientation other than heterosexuality is illegal and punishable. This means I cannot freely love, have queer friends, or even openly express my identity.

There is no safe space in everyday life; even seeing a psychologist or counselor can make things worse. This constant pressure leads to anxiety, fear, and isolation. Even if someone like me manages to reveal part of their identity in friendly gatherings, they must always be careful. No one can be completely sure that their information won't reach others. Every meeting, every conversation, even every message online, comes with fear.

Being an Atheist in Iran

When I started university, even though I did not consider myself a Muslim, I had not yet become an atheist. I tried to replace Islam with another religion, so I began researching other faiths and spent some time engrossed in this quest.

I visited Zoroastrian temples, Jewish synagogues, and Armenian Christian churches in Isfahan, conducted research, and even spoke with some Bahais in the city. But

none of these convinced me; they only raised more questions. Studying at university shaped me into a science-oriented person and drew me toward atheist literature and advocates, which ultimately led me to embrace atheism.

Alongside the pressure from my sexual identity, doubt and unbelief also placed a heavy burden on my shoulders. In a society where religion shapes all relationships, being an atheist means constantly being exposed to judgment and rejection. People quickly judge others based on their faith. When they learn that someone has no belief, they often see them as "immoral" or "identity-less."

Sometimes, these judgments even come from family and closest friends, making the psychological pressure unbearable. At night, when I think about the future, I realize that I not only have to live with the fear of my sexual orientation being exposed but also with the fear of my atheism being discovered. These two pressures turn everyday life into a dangerous path where every step requires caution and care.

Living in the Shadow of Fear

My experience of living in Iran felt more like living in the shadows. I could not speak freely, experience love, or even discuss my beliefs with anyone. Every word and action had to be like that of a careful and cautious actor.

In social settings, I was always aware of what I said and what I revealed. This caution sometimes caused me to lose real friends and only approach those I felt I could trust. But even trust was relative, because there was no guarantee that someone would not reveal my secret.

Iranian Laws Regarding Sexual Minorities:

- **Punishment for Male Homosexuality (Lavat):** According to Article 274 of the Islamic Penal Code, lavat (sexual relations between men) is punishable by death if proven with the testimony of four just witnesses or the confession of the accused. If the person repents before the execution of the sentence, the punishment may be reduced to imprisonment or flogging.
- **Punishment for Female Homosexuality (Masahigheh):** According to Article 236 of the Islamic Penal Code, masahigheh (sexual relations-

between women) is punishable by 100 lashes if proven with the testimony of four just witnesses or the confession of the accused. If repeated, the punishment may escalate to death.

- **Additional Punishments:** In addition to the above, individuals accused of homosexuality may face charges such as "corruption on Earth" or "enmity against God," which can also carry the death penalty.

In practice, these laws have led to arrests, torture, executions, and social harassment against queer individuals.

Iranian Laws Regarding Atheists:

- **Punishment for Apostasy:** According to Article 266 of the Islamic Penal Code, apostasy (changing one's religion from Islam to a non-Islamic faith) is punishable by death if proven with the testimony of four just witnesses or the confession of the accused. If the person repents before the execution of the sentence, the punishment may be reduced to imprisonment or flogging.
- **Additional Charges:** Beyond apostasy, individuals who promote atheism or criticize Islam may face charges such as "corruption on Earth" or "enmity-

against God," which can also carry the death penalty.

- **Social Restrictions:** Atheists in Iran face legal and social restrictions. For example, they cannot testify in courts, participate in elections, or hold certain government jobs.

In practice, these laws have led to arrests, torture, executions, and social harassment against atheists.

Support Networks and Hope

Despite all the pressures, life in Iran was not entirely cruel and dark. Along the way, I found people who understood me those who had similar experiences and knew what it meant to live in fear. These friends and support networks were like small islands in a sea of anxiety, places where I could be my true self, even if only for a short time.

In these circles, I learned that love and friendship can exist beyond laws and restrictions. I realized that even in an environment full of judgment and threats, people can show empathy and give hope to one another.

Dreaming of the Future

Despite all the hardships and fears, I always nurtured the dream of a free future in my mind. A future where I could love without fear, express my beliefs, and live my life according to my own truth. This hope, even in the darkest moments, kept me going like a small light.

I wished for a day when no child or teenager would have to walk the same path I did, alone and in silence. A day when everyone's identity and beliefs, regardless of their gender or faith, would be respected, and no fear would remain for living authentically.

Part Four: Resistance and Hope

Finding My Voice

After years of living in silence and fear, a moment came when I could no longer stay quiet. My feelings and questions were exploding inside me. I asked myself, "If I keep silent forever, what will remain of me?"

This spark led me to start writing—first in personal notebooks, then letters to myself, and perhaps one day,

articles and writings that could inspire others. Writing for me was like breathing; a tool for survival and resistance.

Finding Shelter

Living with a forbidden identity and different beliefs meant constantly being under threat. Therefore, any place that - could offer temporary safety became vitally important. I found a network of friends and acquaintances who were like small islands in a sea of anxiety.

In these circles, I learned that you can be yourself without fear. You can laugh, love, and even sometimes stray from your beliefs without being judged. These experiences, despite the constant awareness of threats, not only kept me alive but also gave me a small sense of confidence to live authentically.

Learning Resistance

Each passing day, I learned how to stay alive in silence without hiding myself. I learned to face everyday fears instead of running from them. Every small step toward expressing my identity was an act of resistance.

For example, instead of hiding my feelings in a group, I would sometimes show, carefully and deliberately, that I was different. Instead of suppressing my questions about

religion, I examined and analyzed them privately. These were exercises for the day I could live without fear.

Hope for the Future

Despite all the pressures, a small light always remained in my mind: the day I could live freely, the day no one would have to hide their true identity. Even in the darkest moments, this light sustained me.

For me, hope was not just a wish it was a tool of resistance. When the world seemed suffocating, thinking about a free future kept me standing.

"We should not force anyone to accept a religion or belief, because no one can change their heart by compulsion."

John Locke



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